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[For additional information on the Poro-Sande secret societies, see the NN23 Sea Islanders file, 3: Creel, Category 171, pp. 45-51 passim.]

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

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THE AFRICAN BACKGROUND

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ture, the long march, and the Middle Passage. Later discussion on Gullah folk religion will offer interpretations of how functional and ritualistic features of Poro-Sande Societies specifically, and other initiation rites generally, may have merged with Gullah versions of Christianity. This was especially apparent in that Gullah folk religion served as a cultural and community building force and a means of instilling individual self-worth among bondpeople.

Religion and Order in Traditional Society

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Both Islamic and traditional African religions, similar to Christian spiritual belief, adhered to a kind of monotheism. For non-Moslem Africans the Supreme Being or Sky God had many names. Akan-Ashanti referred to God as *Onyame*. Bantu peoples called God *Nzambi*. Among the Mende God was *Ngwao* and to the Gola *Dayo*. The Supreme Deity was generally considered omniscient, omnipotent, and creator of all life. God represented the highest values—kindness, justice, sincerity, and mercy. Thus in African perceptions, God was no fomenter of mischief or ill will. Unlike Jehovah, God was not to be feared, and no prayers needed to be offered. Evil came from other sources, not the Creator. Although God was not accorded worship through libation and was invisible, allegiance was rendered, and the Deity's ultimate power over humans was recognized. "Nzambi possesses us and eats us," or "he is gone, Nzambi has willed it," were central themes in some BaKongo proverbs and songs.¹³

Belief in afterlife was integral to traditional African religion. But Africans did not view the future world with fear, nor, as in Christianity, as a place of dispensations for rewards and punishments in a strict sense. In this land of the dead where life continued, there was no sickness, disease, poverty, or hunger. But underworld inhabitants retained the positions of their earthly hierarchy. Death was a journey into the spirit world, not a break with life or earthly beings. The idea of the perpetuity of life through time, space, and circumstance was common to African religious culture, and the complexity of this belief system is typified by BaKongo cosmology and concepts of the four moments of the sun. Using the sun through its course around the earth, the BaKongo pointed out the four stages which make up one's life cycle: (1) rising—meaning birth, beginning, or regrowth, (2) ascendancy—meaning maturity and responsibility, (3) setting—implying death and transformation, (4) midnight,

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

CHAPTER 9

Folk Religion in the Slave Quarters

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All was silent on the plantation. The sun had gone down and the chill December wind which blew crisply from the tide-river had driven the people into the cabins. Here and there all over the plantation, like the throbbing stars which night had called to light her world, the red glow of the fireplaces flashed out into the darkness through the open doorways, as if to mark the heart of a home. Suddenly a sharp persistent jingle broke the silence. It was the Praise House bell calling the people of the plantation together for their evening "Praise". . . .*

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The secret societies are an embodiment of . . . supernatural power. Collectively, they provide an institutional structure which bears . . . similarities to the medieval church in Europe. . . . They lay down various rules of conduct, prescribe certain forms of behavior and are the sole agency capable of remitting certain sins.**

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On the Sea Islands, one rarely saw a plantation home that did justice to the name "big house," since most planters maintained their more elegant residences elsewhere. But there was always a large, airy "main house," sometimes inhabited by the planter and his family during the spring and cold season. The main house was situated about half a mile from the overseer's abode. Not too far away from the overseer's residence were the yards and outbuildings, followed by the slave quarters. Gullahs called their quarters "the street," and it was described as "a real street in the

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*"The Long Look," n.d., misc. corr., Penn School Papers, vol. 1, SHC.

**Kenneth Little, "The Role of the Secret Society in Cultural Specialization" *American Anthropologist* 51 (1949): 199.

[P. 276]

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988

NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

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THE SOCIORELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

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began among the Gullahs and the other ended, or if in slavery a shared authority and governance was practiced. Among Windward Coast Africans authority rested with two bodies—the chief and his elders, and cultural authority, which consisted of Poro and Sande leaders. The latter was called the Poro Council. "All grave and problematic questions touching the interest of the section or tribe in general were handled by this Poro Council, and their decisions, after due deliberation, were preemptory." Among the BaKongo, governance was far more centralized and hierarchical. Authority was in the hands of a king, and on the village level, a chief, who might have advisers, among whom was a medicine man (*Nganga Nkisi*).²⁸ But the importance of the priest in all African societies may explain the continued presence of the spiritual parents. Because spiritual parents, like their African counterparts, held their positions for life, and since they comprised the "religious court," they possibly represented the communal soul of the people while the elder personified the individual soul in a more Christian context. From the spiritual leader a Gullah candidate not only received religious guidance but also instruction in conduct or "manners," thus preserving values as well as maintaining authority. Different social conditions make it impossible to actually compare types of instruction given to African and Gullah initiates. But in both situations such qualities as good conduct, allegiance, generosity, and group responsibility were emphasized. Secret society initiates received a rich background in physical survival, social interaction, instruction in ethnic-group history, and art. They were also schooled in their particular occupation for the future. For Gullah "seekers," instruction was probably a mixture of Christianity, Africanisms, and practical information. Candidates were taught how to pray, an interpretation of the nature of God and Christ, concepts about death, and especially about the realities of life, all within a context relevant to their circumstances as bondpeople.²⁹

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When African initiates left the bush, they returned to the village as "reborn," and were said to have "crossed the water." Their former existence was obliterated—old animosities, debts, even crimes no longer existed. The person was entering a new life with new responsibilities. Neophytes were expected to take their place in the village, to serve it when called upon, and to obey its regulations as interpreted by the Poro Council. When initiates were led back to the village, they underwent a washing ceremony in the creek or river. After "washing," new members were dressed up for their final return. Parents publicly expressed pride

4: Carawan & Carawan B,2-5 (1959-1989) 1989
 NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
 South Carolina
 Johns Island



Rev. G. C. Brown

THE STRUGGLE HAS COME WITH ESAU

He's a self-made man—what you call pulling up by your own bootstraps. Everybody here live practically on the same level, but Esau is in a class all by himself.

When we first came to Johns Island in '36 I saw there was a future for Esau. He used to come to me for night teaching. I taught him, right here in my house, to continue his English and grammar and reading. Then, when he stopped coming here, he went to night school at Burke in the city and developed and increased his knowledge.

There's not another one here like him. I knew his father. He belonged to this church, but his father was not that type of person. He was the kind of "you doing too much, Esau . . ." You know.

We have a civic organization here on Johns Island and Esau is the president. He's tried to let other people take over, but we elect somebody, he serve maybe three months and give it up, and Esau just have to take it back over again. That's why he's stayed in office so long. Others become discouraged and quit. But he hasn't ever become discouraged. He just work on through.

There's always two groups when somebody like Esau builds himself up—one that appreciates and another that doesn't think too well of it. I think now most everybody sees what he's done and I don't think he has

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Club and asked us to let them play basketball there. They'd been playing outside during this basketball season, and they'd been getting beat eighty-something to twenty.

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Last night we had the school come in and they had a talent show, and had a record hop behind it, and I understand about two hundred head or more were there. Then we started a Boy Scout here. We are interested in getting the boys because we feel like it would be a good thing for young boys to be a better citizen. They are planning to have their programs at the Club.

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Then we have a young citizenship group that we organized. It concerns itself with race relations and voter registration or everything that goes to make the human being happy. They got a volume of encyclopedia to study a variety of words that they might have a vocabulary large enough to answer questions. And they feel happy about it, because that's one of the things kept them from running up and down the street and have nothing else to do.

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I stated before that we emphasize the word "progressive." If we are going to be progressive on this island, we still have a lot to do.

Mr. Esau Jenkins

THOSE TYPEWRITER CAME FALLING DOWN
IN THE SCHOOL, OVERNIGHT

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We need better equipment and better instruction in our schools to make our children better able to compete with other children. I felt there are so many Negroes whose children wouldn't be college material, and so many Negroes' income wouldn't allow them to send their children to college. If a child goes to school and just take up home economics and some agriculture, they wouldn't able to use it when they come out, and they be just as bad or worse off than a child who hasn't gone to high school who will go on the farm and work and never think about it.

The child who had been through high school feel bad scrubbing somebody's floor or working on the farm—much worse than the child who never had any training. So my suggestion was that the school give shorthand and typing.

I told Robert Johnson, a man who is very energetic in doing things, to go to the Haut Gap School and ask the principal if it be possible to get in some typewriters and give shorthand and typing, that our girls who would want to be secretary and can't go to college would come out and know how

491 one-lane affairs, which pass through woods of oak and pine
346 and marshes filled with cat tails. The church itself is an
461 impressive structure, built by the cooperative labor of the
476 men many years ago, each of whom hauled an allotment of con-
493 crete blocks from the boat landing in ox carts over the
368 deeply rutted sand roads. It was built in a location equally
794 distant from the "four corners" which were populated at that
time, and faces due east. Preceding the major morning ser-
mon, three Sunday-school classes are held simultaneously in
the church sanctuary, with oral reading and discussion of a
printed lesson a major component of the lessons for all age
796 groups. Formal preaching is held one Sunday each month, with
793 morning and evening services conducted by a well-educated
794 minister who comes from Georgetown. On other Sundays, ser-
591 vices are conducted by church members. The most prestigious
social group on the island is that of the Board of Deacons
of the church; this small group of six or seven of the oldest
men conducts the major business of the island. Other busi-
595 ness is conducted by two women's clubs or "lodges," which
often meet on Sunday afternoons in the abandoned schoolhouse.
Other social activities are parties, adult education classes,
music and dancing, and story telling. Community parties
527 are sometimes held in the old school building, and adult
873 education classes have been conducted there as well. Music
533 is a highly valued activity in every age group, as evidenced
535 both by the singing for Sunday services and by the dancing